Ambedkar's Speech at Mahad: An Epitome of Social Revolution

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Birth is not the cause, my friend; it is virtues which are the cause of auspiciousness. Even a chandala observing the vow is considered a Brahmin by the Gods. (Lord Krishna in the Bhagawad Gita)

The caste system is one of the most misrepresented, misinformed, misused, misunderstood and the most maligned aspects of Hinduism in India. It is a curse, a black spot on the very face of India. The Hindu caste system has often been described as the cruellest apartheid, imposed by the barbaric white invaders on the innocent dark-skinned natives. The problem has been faced by a number of other nations also but it has shown its bleakest face in India. History shows that people from the low caste have always been exploited and humiliated in all the possible ways. There was a time when the shudras were not allowed to enter the homes of the upper-caste people. They were not allowed to enter the temples which were meant only for upper-caste people. The situation was very critical during the colonial period in India. Shudras during this period were thrice colonised. As a result, this system devalued the very dignity of the untouchables. It also made them socially degraded and isolated and excluded them from educational and cultural opportunities.

Dr. Ambedkar was born during this critical time when caste-system was at its peak in Indian society. He fought against social, economic and political injustice prevailing in the then Indian society. He was not only a thinker and philosopher but a visionary also. Most of his ideas and philosophical thoughts revolved around the welfare of common human beings especially the untouchables. His main struggle was to make the Dalits aware of their socio-political rights for their consolidation and upliftment. The aim of the present paper is to reveal Ambedkar's criticism of the Indian social system in the light of his famous speech delivered at Mahad on 25 December, 1927. The day is very significant in the history of the Dalit Movement as Dr. Ambedkar began an agitation to draw water from the Chavadar Lake at Mahad on this day. Actually, the water of this lake was reserved for the upper-caste people and the untouchables were denied to draw water from here. It is the same place where Manusmriti was burnt as a symbol of Dalit protest against untouchability. Though the lake water was meant for all the people according to the constitutional law, but the upper-caste people attacked on the untouchables when they went to draw water from there. The attackers were sentenced to four months' rigorous imprisonment. But the fact is that the untouchables were restricted to draw water from there which was a violation of law and humiliation of the untouchables.

Ambedkar elaborates the idea by appreciating the French National Assembly and its principles. He compares the Indian caste system with the class system that existed in the France of 1789. Like the Hindu society, the French society also had a class of Brahmins and another of Kshatriyas. But in place of the

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three different castes of Vaishya, Shudra and Atishudra, there was one class that comprehended these. What Ambedkar felt was that the inequality that existed in the Indian society was also to be felt in the French social systém. But the nature of this inequality in France was different as it was economic in nature while in India, it was more social. Ambedkar finds great similarity between the French National Assembly that met on 5 May, 1789 and the assembly at Mahad on 25 December, 1927. The similarity is not only in the circumstances of the two meetings but also in their ideas. Though the scope of the French Assembly was far wider in the comparison of the Mahad agitation. Moreover the French Assembly had to carry the threefold organisation of the French political, social and religious systems. While the Mahad agitation was confined to social and religious aspects. He elaborates the facts by revealing what the French Assembly did in the matter of the religious and social reorganisation of their nation. Three important proclamations were issued by the French Assembly: the first proclamation abolished the three classes and blended them into one. The second proclamation was about the priest and it abolished the autonomy of the religious orders and assigned to the French nation the authority to appoint the priest. The third proclamation was about a general nature and laid down the principles on which all social arrangements ought to rest. The third one is called the king of all proclamations as it brought about a revolution not only in France but the entire Europe. Ambedkar was of the view that the dictates of the French National Assembly should be followed by the Hindu society for all-around development and equality of all.

The essence of Mahad speech is that Ambedkar did not want the removal of the untouchability alone; he wanted the complete removal of any form of discrimination prevailing in the Hindu society. He says:

If untouchability alone is removed, we may change from Atishudras to Shudras; but can we say that this radically removes untouchability?... If a snake is to be killed it is not enough to strike at its tail-its head must be crushed. If any harm is to be removed, one must seek out its root and strike at it. An attack must be based on the knowledge of the enemy's vital weakness. (Ambedkar, Speech at Mahad)

He further elaborates it by giving the example of the power of the Patricians over the Plebeians in the Roman society, an illustration of the power of religion over man. In the ancient Rome, there were two classes-the Patricians from the upper class and the Plebeians from the lower class. Unfortunately, all the power was in the hands of the Patricians and they misused it to subjugate the Plebeians. The Plebeians revolted and fought for a share in the supreme executive under the Roman Republic and secured the seat of a Plebeian elected by a separate committee, which was constituted of the Plebeians. But this did not lessen their misery as the officers who enforced the laws were all Patricians. Then the Plebeians demanded the appointment of two tribunes, of whom one should be elected by the Plebeians. This demand was also granted. But again the Plebeians could not get rid of suppression. Actually the Roman tradition was that no officer could enter upon the duties of his office unless the Oracle of Delphi declared that the officer was acceptable to the goddess. The priests who were in charge of the temple of Delphi belonged to the Patrician class. And they never declared a Plebeian acceptable to the goddess. In this way, the Plebeians were cheated of their rights. The Plebeians were themselves responsible for this as they too, like the Patricians, held the belief that the approval

of the goddess was a must for entering the office. Their efforts proved meaningless as they never tried to strike the root of the problem. Had they realized that the election was enough and the approval of the goddess was unnecessary, they would have got the full benefit. What Ambedkar tries to say is that while seeking a way to remove untouchability, they must inquire closely into what will eradicate the disease completely. Otherwise they too, like the Plebeians, may miss their aim. Mere removal of the restrictions on social intercourse or interdrinking will not remove untouchability. In his views the removal of untouchability consists in breaking down the ban on intermarriage and doing so will establish real equality in society. The root of untouchability lies in the ban on intermarriage. So, their fight should be not only against the ban on interdrinking, it must be against the ban on intermarriage also.

Ambedkar feels that this is not a simple task; they will have to fight hard for it because the Brahmins will never give their consent for it. Actually the Brahmins have ruled over other castes since time immemorial and they would not like to surrender their supremacy so easily. They, according to Ambedkar, don't have the patriotism of the Samurais of Japan who sacrificed their privileges for the welfare of the common people and the national unity of the Japanese society. Nor the task will be carried out by other castes of the Hindu religion. They will have to do it themselves by taking drastic steps. If they wait for the help and support of other castes, they may be in difficulty. Their life will gain a true meaning only if they consider that they were born to carry out this task. Ambedkar gives a number of examples of discrimination against the untouchables. He states that other classes of their level can be found easily in the army, the police, the courts and other offices. But there is not a single person from the untouchable class in these jobs. The fact is that the law does not debar them from these jobs, everything is permissible so far as the law is concerned. But the government finds itself powerless as they are considered untouchables by other Hindu castes that are on key posts in various departments of Indian government. The untouchables are supposed to be unfit for these jobs. At the same time, they cannot start any decent trade as they are in lack of money which is required to take up any business. Moreover, the people will not accept goods from them as they are untouchables.

Ambedkar concludes the speech by asserting that untouchability is not a simple matter, it is the mother of poverty and lowliness which has brought them to a very abject state. If they want to raise themselves out of it, they will have to undertake this task not only for their own benefit but for the benefit of the nation too. He gives some suggestions for its eradication. The first one is to remove the caste system from the Hindu society. The disastrous framework of the four-caste system must be broken down and in place of it, there should be a single-caste system. Not only this, the inequality inherent in the four-caste system must be completely removed. Many people mock at the very idea of equality in our society as they feel that the very idea is an improbability. To some extent it is true because no man is another's equal naturally. People vary on the basis of physique, talent and will power. It is quite possible to bring equality but talent cannot be provided to all by the government. Ambedkar says:

If the principle of equality means that privilege should depend, not on birth, wealth, or anything else, but solely on the merits of each man, then how can it be demanded that a man without merit, and who is dirty and

vicious, should be treated on a level with a man who has merit and is clean and virtuous? (Ambedkar, Speech at Mahad)

What Ambedkar feels is that the people from the low caste cannot show any talent until and unless they are provided opportunity to reveal it. History shows that a number of people die unnoticed as they are not given proper opportunity. They also would have become great had they been given opportunity at the right time. If the slaves are not treated with equality, how can they achieve higher status? If the clean man always hates the unclean man and refuses to sit with him, there will come no change in the status of that unclean man. And if the criminals are never given a chance to improve, they will die with the spot of a sinner on their heads. In the same manner, if the untouchables are never given opportunity to develop their talent, they will also remain untouchables till their last journey to the grave. So far as the system of untouchability in the Hindu society is concerned, it has checked the progress of individuals consequently checking the progress of society. This inequality in the Hindu society is weakening the very Hindu society. It has completely disorganised and demoralised the Hindu society. He feels that the Hindu society is a myth as the name Hindu is itself a foreign name. If the Hindu society is to be reformed, the four-caste system and untouchabilty must be removed from it. It should be based on the foundations of the two principles of one caste and equality. Nothing can be built on the foundations of caste-neither a nation nor any concept of morality. Anything that is built on the foundations of caste will crack and cannot take a complete form. The work is as much for the benefit of the nation as it is for the upliftment of the untouchables. It will be a task of social revolution which should be done peacefully.

To conclude, Ambedkar feels that the Hindu society seems to stand in need of a moral regeneration. But the question is who can decide and control this moral regeneration? The answer is- only those who have undergone an intellectual regeneration and those who are honest enough to have the courage of their convictions born of intellectual emancipation. But the problem is that the intellectuals to whom the masses look for guidance are either too dishonest or too indifferent to guide them in the right direction. The situation is really very tragical. Only the people of good vision can do it. Finally, Ambedkar requests the opponents not to oppose them in this task as it is not only for their own welfare but for the welfare and all-around progress of the nation.

References

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